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What Bao Says About the Effect of Asian Parenting

“Bao”, directed by Domee Shi tells the story of an Asian mother trying to raise her dumpling son, but her overprotective and overbearing nature drives a rift between the mother and edible child, eventually leading to the mother devouring him. In the end, it turns out that the dumpling child was metaphorical, as it depicted a relationship between a mother and her rebellious son. Bao sends a message about how overprotective mothers, feeding on their own fears and uncertainties from immigration, drive their children to rebel against their caretakers in any way possible, even in bad ways.



From 'Bao' by Pixar and Domee Shi

Throughout the film, we see clear examples of the mother being highly overprotective of the little dumpling boy, even to the point of stopping him from socializing with other boys his age. This kind of control often exercised over children by Chinese parents sometimes cause their children issues with adjusting to social life. In their study, “What Do Parents Think? Middle-Class Chinese Immigrant Parents' Perspectives on Literacy Learning, Homework, and School-Home Communication”, Guofang Li explains that “Chinese parents... monitor their children more closely... emphasize greater sense of family obligation, value grades more than general cognitive achievement... be less satisfied with a child's accomplishments, and believe more in effort and less in innate ability... Since culture shapes what parents believe... Chinese parents' distinct cultural beliefs and their more directive and controlling parenting styles ... influence how Chinese children are socialized into literacy practices at home” (Li, Guofang). This study shows that the way Chinese parents raise their children tend to fall on the overprotective side, emphasizing the importance of family to their children. Due to the culture clash that immigrant children experience, different ideals given to them outside of their home versus in their home, this may lead to their child becoming rebellious in an effort to stave off their parents. Bao shows that an overprotective parent, who may have good intentions, might end up ruining their relationship with their child in the long run.

In Bao, the mother of the dumpling also rejects her baby's girlfriend, whom she believes to be a bad influence to her little dumpling. She eventually decides to swallow the dumpling whole, a manifestation of her desire to protect her child forever. This mother is unwilling to let go of her child, and is uncompromising, not wanting to even think about the dumpling's position. Cheng Jean Gorman, who studied the parenting attitudes of Chinese mothers, says that “Comparative studies have consistently characterized Chinese parents as highly restrictive and

controlling, or ‘authoritarian,’ where unquestioned obedience to authority is stressed rather than two-way open communication between children and parents... an authoritarian parenting style has been associated with mixed consequences for child development and functioning, such as in psychological health and academic functioning and motivation” (Gorman 73). The mother of the dumpling continually sacrifices her son’s own happiness in exchange for “keeping him safe” in her eyes. She refuses to let the dumpling leave home and forge his own path, because she wants to keep him safe from what she perceives as danger. But when the illusion has faded away, the girlfriend that the dumpling brought home is nowhere near as dangerous as the mother perceived her to be, and her human son is no longer a baby that she needs to protect. Bao shows us that even though our mothers’ intentions come from a place of love, and a will to keep us safe, there will always be conflicts of interest. Mothers want to keep their children safe, while their children want their independence.



An image from ‘Bao’ by Pixar and Domee Shi depicting the dumpling getting uncomfortable with the affection.

This strategy of raising children most likely stems from several factors. The greatest factor is the culture in which the parents were raised. When Stacey N Doan and Qi Wang talk

about how parents from Western versus Chinese culture develop emotional awareness for their children, they say that “Narrative practices may reflect the theory of language upheld in a culture... In Western cultures, language often maps onto ‘belief psychology,’ with the function of language being descriptive or representative. ... This is in contrast to traditional Chinese Culture where the use of language often serves a regulative function in guiding behavior... ‘the function of words is to engender and express attitudes with implications for action...’” (Doan and Wang 1491). Chinese culture tends to encourage actions rather than words, which leads to situations where base emotions may not be as emphasized or focused on. This then leads to parents potentially neglecting their children’s own feelings, and thus not considering how their own children might feel about their parenting.

Most immigrant parents, and parents in general, may see differently in regards to overprotective parenting. Many of them say that they only wish to protect their children from the same things that they have experienced. This kind of paranoia likely stems from being in an unfamiliar place themselves. Having immigrated to another country, many mothers experience constant anxiety about how their children learn in an environment that is unfamiliar to the parents. When you look at it from this perspective, this overprotectiveness suddenly makes a lot more sense. They simply don’t want their children to feel as lost as they were.

However, overprotectiveness will eventually lead to a child becoming unsure on how to handle themselves in the future. Hand-holding a child through every single thing and never letting them get hurt will only lead to a child being unable to navigate their world in the future. A mother cannot protect them forever. A common factor that contributes to how Chinese mothers tend to raise their children is a level of stress often associated with the fears and stresses of motherhood. Because Chinese language culture doesn’t put much emphasis on mental health,

this kind of stress may lead to the kind of overprotectiveness that children find frustrating in the future. Qiao Li, who studied the effects and perceptions of perinatal depression, explains that when interviewing Chinese immigrant mothers, “Participants had limited knowledge of perinatal depression and had difficulty distinguishing between normal perinatal mood fluctuations and more severe symptoms of depression. They discussed immigrant-related stress, conflicts with parents/in-laws while "doing the month", the perceived gap between the ideal of "perfect moms" and reality, and challenges with parenting as the causes of perinatal depression” (Li, Qiao). This research shows how the challenges that come all at once; the stress of being a mother, an immigrant, and pressure from outsiders, ultimately influence the behavior of not only the mother but also eventually the child that the mother must raise. All the stress inevitably causes fear to be a great factor in how a child is raised. Without the right tools to combat this depression and fear, mothers project their fears onto their children, causing their overprotectiveness. In the future, this same fear may ingrain themselves onto their children, and the cycle repeats itself.

Bao shows us a story where a mother loves her child so much that she goes overboard, seeing him as still a child no matter how much he grows, and trying to protect him as though he were still a baby. This kind of parenting technique is often seen in Chinese immigrant parents today, as they emphasize the importance of obeying elders and the value of family. And as their children grow up, their parents are reluctant to let them go on their own way. Bao is a message about motherhood, and what it means for both mother and child when the stress of motherhood causes them to protect their child too much. It's important to remember that children have emotions and can make decisions just as well. As this generation of immigrant children grows up, they will inevitably face new challenges as well as new opportunities. In the future, I hope

that this generation will learn from their parents' mistakes, and raise their children in a way that allows them to truly think for themselves.

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Li, Qiao, et al. "Experiences and Perceptions of Perinatal Depression among New Immigrant Chinese Parents: A Qualitative Study - BMC Health Services Research." *BioMed Central*, BioMed Central, 26 July 2021,
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<https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12913-021-06752-2>.

[Author Credentials] Li, Qiao is on the HER Team and the Department of Maternal and Child Health. They went to the Xiangya School of Public Health, Central South University. They have written many medical papers mostly on physical health.

[Audience / Type of Information] The BMC is a website that provides peer-reviewed articles of a medical nature. Its audience consists primarily of medical professionals or medical students looking to research one topic or another. The paper is grounded in several case studies on perinatal depression, listing the background, methods, results of the study, and conclusion. The paper is entirely text-based.

[Purpose / Bias / Point of View] The purpose of this paper is to bring more awareness to perinatal depression and to find ways to better counter the effects that it causes. The point of view in this paper is strictly professional.

[Currency of the Source] This article was published one year ago, and since mental health has always been an issue, the information is likely not outdated enough to be irrelevant.

[Coverage / Scope / Content] This study covers its topic thoroughly and is based in science more than opinion. The scope is quite large, as the ones who wrote the paper interviewed 13 different women for its study.

[Relevance to Paper] This article discusses the effect that giving birth has on immigrant mothers. Since this paper is mostly about how Asian parenting affects children, this paper on how the parent themselves is handling their own situation may be relevant.

Gorman, Cheng Jean. "Parenting Attitudes and Practices of Immigrant Chinese Mothers of Adolescents." National Council on Family Relations, Vol. 47, No. 1, Jan, 1998, JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/584853#metadata_info_tab_contents

[Author Credentials] Gorman graduated from Brown University, starting her career in education but eventually moving to psychology. She is a licensed psychologist and has published several books on education and psychology.

[Audience / Type of Information] This book is entirely text-based and is an exploratory study on the psychology of Asian parenting tactics and the effect it has on children. It lists the background, methods, results, and conclusions based on the results.

[Purpose / Bias / Point of View] The purpose of this book is to explain the reasons for "authoritative parenting" in immigrant mothers and the effects of this kind of parenting. Since the author used to be an educator, the emphasis on education is very heavy in this book.

[Currency of the Source] This was published in 1998, which makes it over 30 years old. Some of the information may no longer be relevant, which calls it into question.

[Coverage / Scope / Content] The coverage is through, and the scope is quite small since only 8 women were interviewed for this study.

[Relevance to Paper] This book discusses a study on the ideas Chinese immigrant mothers have on parenting. Since my essay focuses on the effect of authoritarian parenting, it makes this article very relevant, but again, as it is old, its relevance is somewhat diminished.

Image Sources:

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